Chapter 4
Cultivating Teacher Leadership in Rural School Districts

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the uniqueness of rural schools and the importance of teacher leaders in those settings. The teacher leader model will be different in a smaller school, although this context is less studied. Because teacher leaders have experience in the community context, they can guide others. Rural schools often have more difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers; while location cannot be changed, working conditions can. Supportive mentors can help rural school districts retain new teachers; however, teacher leaders are often not formally recognized. Less than half of states have a teacher leader licensure, and even fewer have standards in this area. Although national standards exist, little research has focused on how these and other professional development strategies can be effectively implemented in the rural setting.

INTRODUCTION

School leaders across the United States face many challenges: reduced budget and resources, teacher shortages, student poverty, high mobility, inconsistent technology access, and countless others, but these challenges may manifest differently in a rural

setting. Cultivating leadership in rural (and often, urban) schools is increasingly challenging, as qualified teachers become more difficult to recruit and retain. Students with college education often move away from rural communities to find a job; teaching is one of the few positions where college graduates return to their community to find a stable job with good benefits. Attracting qualified teachers to work in small, rural communities is a struggle, even though the students in those schools desperately need them. Teachers and administrators in rural areas typically make less money (Latterman & Steffes, 2017), although the cost of living is lower. These challenges mean that some do not stay, either in education or in the geographic area. Turnover for both administrators and teachers costs districts and taxpayers money, not to mention staff morale.

These challenges have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 sudden pivot to online learning in spring 2020, and the questions surrounding school opening in fall of 2020. For rural districts where internet may be slow or nonexistent, the pivot only served to widen the technology gap. In May 2019, 63% of rural Americans surveyed had broadband Internet access; however, a computer is less likely to be found in a rural home than in a suburban home (Perrin, 2019). Therefore, the absence of technology in the rural setting, even when access to the Internet is available, feeds the inequities of online learning. Some small schools were able to mobilize staff to deliver meals, devices, textbooks, and other supplies for students during COVID, but not all had the resources for such outreach. Those that were able to offer creative educational programming did so in part because of the teacher leaders in their buildings. These teacher leaders often worked individually with their colleagues to demonstrate a new teaching tool with which they had experience; they were not only concerned with the learning of their own students but also sharing their knowledge and skills with their colleagues. Behrstock-Sherratt, Brookins, and Payne (2020) spotlighted several National Board certified teachers fulfilling this role in their publication "Teacher Leadership in Uncertain Times."

Teacher leaders become even more important as substitute teachers and inexperienced teachers in rural areas need mentoring and resources. For example, in rural districts, principals may wear "multiple hats," including instructional duties (Lotter et al, 2020). State policies regarding adding certification by exam may support this strategy. This policy means that teachers may test into certification for another area by passing the requisite exam rather than taking more courses. In some states, this is restricted to similar content at different levels, e.g. secondary math teachers adding middle school math. Teacher leaders can model for novice teachers how to balance the preparation of so many different types of courses at the high school and middle school levels.

In rural schools, secondary and middle school teachers may teach a variety of courses (Barley & Brigham, 2008); an alumni of one author's program taught physics,

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